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Author(s): William Hughes Mearns
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A FOOTNOTE TO CINDERELLA

(AN EXPOSITION FOR TEACHERS ONLY)

WILLIAM HUGHES MEARNS
School of Pedagogy, Philadelphia

No doubt Cinderella's father felt proper sorrow for the loss of his first wife; especially during the long winter when the lack of a good housekeeper broke uncomfortably into well-adjusted habits. Cinderella, to be sure, was a well-behaved child, and German; so, with much wistful gazing out of the window toward the snow-covered grave in the meadow, she struggled, we know, to act the difficult rôle of woman, helpmate to man, with emphasis upon the "help." But however splendidly she brushed the hearth, scrubbed the floor, prepared the meals and polished up the handle of the big front door, she served with the devotion of a daughter, not with the remarkable, machine-like dexterity of a Teutonic "mate." And Cinderella's father was a man, a German man, a creature who instinctively measures the world in terms of personal comfort, who takes his superiority as a matter of course, like the existence of red corpuscles and the pressure of the atmosphere, and declines to argue the point. So in the spring he doffed his blacks, glanced out of the window with a "Hey oh! I must be getting my oats out!" told Cinderella he rather believed he wouldn't be home early tonight, and let his fancy gently turn to thoughts of the widow with the two children in the yellow house next to the town hall.

The marriage was accomplished so quietly, like transferring real estate or drawing a check, that Cinderella was stepmothered and doubly stepsistered almost before she was aware. The wedding march, veil, rice, old shoes, and honeymoon are the ceremonies of romance. Not that second marriages are devoid of right customs, but they are of a sensible, practical sort—the prudential and unromantic consideration of the cost of living, the contracts, stipulations, codicils, and provisos born of experience. That the lady carried every point we are well assured by the abrupt change in the

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household as reflected in the life of Cinderella. She drops to the ranks, from daughter to slavey, busies herself mightily with pots and pans, and sleeps among the warm ashes of the kitchen hearth.

The cruel stepmother is a German institution invented by the Grimm Brothers. In the story she is introduced as the Spirit of Injustice, employed to give the necessary tragic relief to an otherwise tame domestic comedy. A counterpart in English letters is the murder scene in *Macbeth* which lends tone and meaning to the diverting speech of the drunken porter of Hellgate. For the sake of contrast in the narrative the *deutsche Stiefmutter* beats her children with an unspared rod, acquaints them with the pinch of hunger, casts them out of doors in the bleakest winter, and loses them in forests inhabited solely by wolves, bears, and witches. ("Merely corroborative detail," explains Pooh Bah, "intended to give artistic verisimilitude to a bald and unconvincing narrative.")

Stepmothers the world over have been gentle and kind, revered by stepchildren and praised even by Gossip herself, but in these days of muckraking, the *exposés* of the Grimm Brothers have so inflamed the public mind that the very name of stepmother is almost a reproach, and brave are they who undertake the unpopular rôle. Here's a cup o' kindness to her, the oldest *alma mater* of them all, whose alumni and alumnae cover the globe and give distinction to it; she who faces the easy jest of every penny-a-liner and the foregone indictment of a prejudiced public opinion, who serenely bears another's burden, and saves untold households from domestic collapse! Prosit!

Cinderella's stepmother was not unjust, as a careful reading of the text will show. Indeed, she is particularly strong for rigid justice; it was her chief defect. We children of this world do not want justice for ourselves, however much we may cry for it for others. We want sympathy, flattery, partiality, special favors, something more than our rightful share. That is why mothers are such lovable creatures and rear so many happy, spoiled children; their function is to give heaping measure twice over, when probably what we most deserve is no measure at all. We always grow uncomfortable when our superior officer begins with a promise of a square deal. Usually that means the other fellow is about to

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get the promotion. So we're commonly strong for giving the other chap his just deserts—and not a drop over. Certainly we don't want ours, and pray we never shall get them.

The two stepsisters, however, were spiteful minxes. No doubt about that. You're sure their names are Ortrude and Kundry, certainly not Anna and Gretchen. What woman, given the power, will not snub a rival sister? (We do not ask for information; we hope no one will reply; we merely throw the question out for what it's worth.) We have heard of loyal and lasting feminine friendships conceived in the spirit of masculine *camaraderie*, but they seem scarce as double personalities. Their charity toward one another is not one that "endureth all things," but rather the sort that "believeth all things."

This is one of the phenomena of the sex that astonishes man. In his dull rational way he figures out many complex matters, but he is ever stumped at the problem of the adventitious character of woman. She is the herald of Christian unselfishness and the symbol of pagan vanity; she is simple as the dove and wise as the serpent; daily she sacrifices her all for the needy, and nightly she wears, drinks, and eats enough to stop a famine; she crieth aloud in the streets, "Votes for woman!" (bound to come without the crying), and alone in her chamber never grins in the glass. She uplifts the fallen, finds homes for lost children, investigates the Standard Oil, establishes school gardens, gets on boards of education, and demands playgrounds for the kiddies (bless 'em for that!), flares up at vivisection and declaims powerfully against the Demon Rum; and she marries for money, wins at bridge whist (blame 'em!), and is in the front rank to cast the first stone. When she is good, she is very, very good, and when she is bad she is no better than she should be; but, good or bad, her mercies toward her own sex are not always twice strained. At least, so thinks the mere man who looks mildly on and knows what a duffer he is at best and how hard it is to be even halfway godly, righteous, and sober.

There are saintly women (praise be!) who have unerring sympathy for their own, who never "damn with faint praise," who assent with no mere "civil leer." It may be a cultivated habit. If these possess a native uncharity toward their sex, certainly they keep it locked deep within them and daily they summon all their

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sweetness to keep it prisoner. (The analogy suggests Coleridge's strong man, hired to attend him day and night and beat down every attempt of the poet to satisfy his craving for opium.)

What with a strict stepmother, snobbish stepsisters, and a delinquent father, Cinderella is generally supposed to have fared badly, and much pity accrues to her thereby. Rather do we tender sincere congratulations. In the face of the judgment of generations of children we take the stand that she was fairly well off. Nature is a wonderful provider, and the best protection she gives to the human animal is adaptability. "When Benjamin Bunny grew up," Beatrix Potter tells us, "he married his cousin Flopsy. They had a large family, and they were very improvident and cheerful." The poor are astonishingly contented. They know the sweet uses of adversity; it is frequently their sole wealth. They go half-clad in winter and become immune to colds; they have infrequent "pennies," and are saved from certain of the seven deadly sins; they eat no truffles or mixtures à la Newburg and grow hearty on plain diet. They may not always find tongues in trees nor sermons in stones, but certainly they are able to "translate the stubbornness of fortune" into cheerful peace. Any farmer's boy could give points to Thoreau: his whole life is a Walden.

Societies for Adding Complexity to the Simple Lives of the Poor might well recall Dr. Haggage's eulogy of the Marshalsea debtor prison:

> We are quiet here; we don't get badgered here; there's no knocker here, sir, to be hammered at by creditors, and bring a man's heart into his mouth. Nobody comes here to ask if a man's at home, and say he'll stand upon the door mat till he is. Nobody writes thundering letters about money, in this place. It's freedom sir, it's freedom! . . . . Elsewhere people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one thing, anxious respecting another. Nothing of the kind here, sir. We have done with all that—we know the worst of it; we have got to the bottom, we can't fall. And what have we found? Peace. That's the word for it. Peace.

So we are content to believe that instead of pouting and bemoaning her hard lot, Cinderella accepted the accumulated public opinion (as we all do, eventually; although it's a strain on our egotism) and set to her tasks cheerfully. The gibes of her well-dressed sisters and the justice of their mother touched her slightly.

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Alternately she dreamed and sang at the work. She dreamed of her mother, living over days gone and half-remembered, and of the father who had almost forgotten her; she sang of birds that talk and wishes that come true, of fine apparel, of beauty that dazzles and makes wise men foolish and strong men afraid, of the beneficent power of gold, of the world's applause, and, at rare moments, of the prince who should surely come some day and bear her, protesting, struggling, and wholly content, away to his palace. The stings and arrows of that outrageous household could not harm her; for Cinderella was at heart a poet, and dwelt in fantasy as became a Literary Person.

"What shall I bring my daughters from the fair?" inquires the father. And one asks for gold and pearls, and the other for purple and fine linen; but Cinderella, whose soul was poesy, astonishes them all by her simple request: "Bring me a twig, father dear, from the first branch that brushes your cheek as you turn toward home."

As you turn toward home! A poet knows that the only joy is giving, and that the only sorrow is lost love. The valuable things of life are within easy reach, can be scattered in largess by the very poor. A world that piles up its goods, and labels them at so much the gross, blinds our eyes to true values.

Men of little faith and less income, often enough, alas, have we troubled deaf heaven with our bootless cries for mere commodities that men buy and sell, have desired this man's art and that man's scope, with what we most enjoy contented least; we too, like the worldly stepdaughters have fallen into the snare set by the subtle beast, have coveted our neighbor's ox and his ass and his many-acred villa: yet in these thoughts, ourselves almost despising, we are able, it may be, to turn our mind toward some old friendship, free as the air yet above all price, summon then the poet in us and sing,

> For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
> That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Yes; we are not unmindful of the monthly bills, nor of their constant verification of the saying that man cannot live by bread alone. Far be it from an obscure dabbler in letters to discount the value of purple and fine linen, or even of gold and pearls. Poets

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must be clothed, if not always in their right mind. We recall no man after Adam who has gone about *both* unadorned and unashamed; and we remember that Eve first inquired for food, and then fashioned a gown.

And when Cinderella's young man called at the house—of course he was a prince; he is always a prince, before marriage—he took her to the great ball, and in true princely fashion monopolized every dance. But permission to shine in society was, as we know, not easily won. With one pretext and another, the stepmother delayed approval. She was not aware, of course, that she was dealing with a Literary Person; one of those who, in spite of their love of make-believe, rather enjoy the real world, especially the follies of it; besides, she had the bias of so many practical people. "You go to college!" have we not heard them exclaim. "Absurd; why not get a place as undertaker's assistant and make something of yourself?" But she gave in, finally, although not without a parting prophecy that awkwardness would bring the girl to public shame, probably quoting, "Thus self-consciousness doth make bad dancers of us all."

We can fancy that ball—her first. What alternate exultations and misgivings! What weeks of preparation for a result so slight! (That's the view of man, who has only to buy a fresh tie and slip into a tail-coat.) And on the eventful night, after a mere nibble at a biscuit, what acrobatic twists and tiptoeings (gas jets flaring) before the long mirror (the hand-glass waving about in front like a witch's wand) to insure a perfect *ensemble!* What secret practice of ogreish, sidelong smiles at the reflected figure; what tears of vexation for an unattainable ideal!

Then the flurry of the last-minute rush, followed by the pitiful wait for the carriage; the crushing, premature fatigue, the certainty of appearing a "fright," the oozing of all self-confidence and even of some self-respect; the fear that he has forgotten all about it, the hope that he has. A carriage clatters and stops outside, the door-bell jingles merrily. One last reassuring glance in the —horrors! the nose is still thickly powdered (to give a dull finish) like a clown's! Abrupt storm of tears; shy entrance of the young man who—presto!—greets a smiling, confident, radiant, witching young woman, charming, superior, overpowering.

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And the gowns!—one cannot resist completing the account, although the text is here silent. Mere man that we are we never miss a word of the next day's newspaper inventory. So with pride (the knowledge was got through much labor) we undertake to fill in the omitted details.

The stepmother wore a striking white satin pelisse, embroidered with pearls, the skirt deeply trimmed with heavy gold chiffon and bands of sable, the bodice of richly toned *crème de menthe*. Her ornaments were rhinestones.

The elder stepsister was becomingly clad in a soft gray chiffon over old rose silk, heavily pailletted. Her ornaments were *marons glacés*.

The younger stepsister was stunning in black Liberty velvet with an overdress of black chiffon (the family was strong for chiffon), edged with trimmings of jet, the corsage draped with rare old lace bespangled with gold *fleur-de-lis* and *café au lait*.

Cinderella, in a simple frock of white lawn, starched like a queen's ruff, stepped timidly, albeit daintily, upon the ballroom floor, and straightway that prince was a nobleman smit.

It is on record that His Highness thereupon advanced several numbers in official ranking and became a man. A prince, Machiavelli and Carlyle agree, is not subject to human folly, but a man is always some sort of fool. In the present instance the prince becomes a flustering, self-conscious, devil-may-care, smirking fool; but the lady has wisdom and to spare for both. She never loses her head. She knows the game instinctively. In her blood is the subtlety of Eve (who caught it, perhaps, from early contact with the subtlest of them all). She makes and breaks engagements with absurd skill. She leads him on as far as the lane, and drops him at the pigeon cote, or, quite to his bewilderment, slips up a pear tree just at the moment when he had begun to feel rather sure of things. And once, when he thought he had her at the very point of surrender, she vanished entirely, leaving him possessed of nothing more tangible than her diminutive slipper. (But, oh, the subtle art of it!) This much of political economy every woman knows, that the way to increase the demand is rigorously to limit the supply.

We must not overlook the remarkable heroism of the step-

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daughters, symbol of all social ambition. To conform to an arbitrary standard set by the noble prince, one young lady, aided and abetted by her mother, be it remembered, cut off her great toe The other, again with the advice of the mother, deliberately shaved off a portion of one heel. Similar acts of renunciation would be discovered, we fancy, in the truthful diary of many a débutante; and the fashion plates of a century, or the present-day advertisements in the *Ladies Home Companion* would exhibit further examples of the same resolute martyrdom. Man is ambitious enough, but he lacks courage. He marries altruistically for money, and even selfishly for love, but grows restive over a mere pinching collar. Between the devil of torture and the deep sea of unattractiveness, women commendably and courageously choose the devil.

Our sympathies go out to the sisters. They suffered stoically, ventured heel and toe, and lost all. Certainly there is no dramatic necessity for punishing them further. Yet the bloodthirsty Brothers Grimm (suggestive name!), intent upon pushing to its limit the moral of the story, invent a pair of doves, who fly into the church on Cinderella's wedding day and peck out the eyes of the stepsisters. One need hardly remark that this part of the narrative is indubitably "made in Germany."

There is consternation in the home when the prince finally sues for Cinderella. Here's a howdy-do! Here's a pretty mess! Here's a state of things! A good heel and toe gone for naught, not to specify sundry gowns adorned with expensive chiffon. The maid in the garden hanging up the clothes turns out to be the queen who should be in the parlor eating bread and honey! The nobody falls heir to an estate; the dolt is discovered a genius; the Literary Person gets published.

There is a brief pause, then an abrupt readjustment to fit the general rejoicing. We knew it all the time. We told you so. We could see it in her eye, or in her forehead, or was it her nose? (And all the while it was her dimple!)

And they lived happily ever after. Of course they did. It all depends how long the prince is kept in a state of smirking foolishness, and we are willing to trust the lady for that. Yes, we know they lived happily ever after, for, like ourself, that prince married a singularly clever young person.

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